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ABSTRACT

American students (mostly white) at a public high school in Stockton, California responded to written questionnaires and oral interviews on their attitudes toward and relationships with Indochinese students in their school and community. The data showed that tension and hostility exist between American and Indochinese students, with 52 percent of the Americans expressing negative views toward the Indochinese. Most of the respondents expressed the opinion that easing the existing language barrier was necessary to ease tensions. High levels of contact between Americans and Indochinese were found to be correlated with positive American attitudes toward the Indochinese; conversely, moderate to low levels of contact were correlated with negative attitudes. It was suggested that non-exposure or low levels of contact perpetuate ill-feelings and racial tension. Hence it was proposed that by increasing levels of exposure and contact between American and Indochinese students, the number of American students with positive opinions about the Indochinese would be increased as well. (Author/MJL)

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AMERICA'S NEW SCAPEGOAT:
A BRIEF STUDY OF AMERICAN-INDOCHINESE STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS IN A CALIFORNIA PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL

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by

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June 1982

UD 022 495

"...(there has been) a distinct hardening of attitudes all around Southeast Asia. Malaysia (with about 76,000 Vietnamese refugees) announced that it would force all refugees back into international waters and shoot anyone attempting to land. Indonesia (whose refugee population jumped by 7000 to 31,500 in less than a week) said it would no longer grant even temporary asylum to the refugees. Hong Kong, which had been swamped in recent weeks not only by refugee "boat people" from Viet Nam but also by illegal immigrants from China, dispatched its governor, Sir Murray MacLehose, to Britain and the U.S. to discuss the problem."

--Time Magazine, June 25, 1979

I. INTRODUCTION

In a science fiction story by Jack Vance entitled simply, DP, the story is told of the Trogs, a group of people that suddenly arrive en masse, but because of an appearance and culture that are different from the norm, they are shunned by people all over the world. The Austrian government wants to send them to Canada; the Canadians suggest Germany; the Germans politely refuse and offer them to the United States.

It is 1982 and we are now living that science fiction story. Our Trogs are the "boat people" refugees of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Left homeless by the Vietnam war or fleeing the horrors of its aftermath, they, too, have been shunned by people the world over. When magazine covers and stories depicted the poor, starving refugee, stomach bloated from lack of food, American eyes welled with tears. Yet when those same refugees arrived on our doorstep, in search of a place to call home, American hearts hardened.

Several thousand of those refugees have settled in the community in which I live. Having grown up in the typically white suburbs of several parts of America, I have emerged into the "real world" somewhat naive. While I was never sheltered from different races and ethnicities, I was never fully exposed to them either. At the same time, I was never witness to the kinds of hostility and racial tensions I have observed with the coming of this latest group of refugees. I have since learned that the plight of the Indochinese does not differ much from that of the Irish, the Italian, the Japanese.

BACKGROUND/PURPOSE

The site of my study is a public high school in Stockton, California, a traditionally white, middle-, upper-middle class school which is currently experiencing a change in its population. This change involves an increase in the Black and Hispanic populations in addition to a dramatic increase in the Asian student population due to the recent influx of Indochinese refugees into the community at large. (For complete statistics of both the high school and district populations and the ethnic breakdown of both, please see Appendix A.) In 1980, Indochinese students accounted for 5% of the entire district population; in 1982, that number had increased to 13%. At the high school, 18% of the population is presently Asian. What is far more striking, however, is the proportion of the minority population which the Indochinese make up: 50% of the district and 60% of the high school. This influx has created problems of overcrowding throughout the district. There are, for example, enough Indochinese students to fill an entire K-8 school. The high school, which was intended for between 1000 and 1500 students, held 2140 at the beginning of the school year and now accommodates 1914.

Accompanying these figures is a noticeable increase in racial tensions. As a teaching assistant at the high school during last year's summer session, I observed strong feelings of hostility and alienation between Indochinese and American students. It is my intent in doing this study to probe the relationships which exist between these two groups of students. For the purposes of my study, I define "American" as any non-Indochinese student. (I should add that relations between other minorities and the Indochinese encompasses a problem area in itself, and my study involved mainly white students.)

In doing this study, it was necessary to erase my pre-interview biases formed this past summer; rather than wanting to study and understand whether hostilities existed, I wanted to know why they did. In the course of doing the surveys and interviews and analyzing the data, I think that, to some extent, I have come to understand both.

"I get a lot of contact with them where I work...at Alpha Beta on Hammer Lane. You know, that's where they live, either out there or out here by Stagg. And out there most of them seem...awfully lazy. They're really, they're not clean people out there, they're lazy, they buy expensive foods, not bare minimum, you know...They buy stuff that it doesn't seem like you should be buying if you're on welfare...like pizzas or sweets---they buy a lot of sweets.... They're getting away with a lot..."

--Subject High School Senior

II. METHODOLOGY

I spent a day on the subject high school campus conducting my fieldwork. In the morning, I interviewed twelve seniors from two different American government classes which represent a fairly broad cross-section of students. During the lunch hour, I sat in the Huddle, the student cafeteria, observing student behavior and seating patterns. In the afternoon, I distributed 47 written surveys to a group of seniors in a physics class, a sophomore geometry course, and another American government class. I also spent some time talking with Vince Brown, head of the Refugee Resettlement Service for Catholic Charities, in an effort to get some idea of the larger picture.

CONSIDERATIONS

Several factors determined my use of both personal interviews and anonymous surveys. Before I conducted my interviews I felt uncertain that any students would express their true feelings in a face-to-face interview. Moreover, since I am fairly close in age to many of the students and might even know some of them personally, I thought that I might not be able to elicit honest responses from them. Prejudice is something which is intensely personal; it is not an easily shared feeling. It was this thinking which led me to develop the written survey. In it, the students could be completely anonymous, and space was provided in which they could add any comments outside the realm of the questions I had asked.

I found several of the students that I interviewed to be very open and quite willing to talk. On the other hand, it was evident that some students were purposely moderating their views. Many students, I think, were not aware of the implications of much of what they said (and had

they been, they might never have said them). Before sending the students out to speak with me or handing out the surveys, the teacher of the American government class stressed the importance of my study, and thus, the importance of answering as honestly as possible. She also provided the students she selected to be interviewed the option of refusing. I tape recorded each interview, and prefaced each one by telling the student that I was aware of the sensitivity of the subject matter and that they could refuse to answer any question if they wanted to. All the students answered all my questions. I also asked each student if they minded my taping them; only one girl seemed at all apprehensive, wanting to know who else was going to hear the tape. She proved to be one of my best informants, evidently losing all previous apprehension once she began talking.

I found the written surveys to be particularly useful as a supplement to the interviews. The answers ranged from extremely brief to very long, some students choosing to answer as much as possible with simple yes or no answers, with others writing their opinions quite freely. I can never be 100% certain that the responses I received accurately reflect the students' deeply-rooted feelings, but I do feel that the combination of the written surveys and the personal interviews provided me with a fair representation of their views.

"I think if they want to come to the U.S.
they should go to their own schools were (sic)
everybody else would not have to bother with
them, also if they wanted to come to a public
school first learn to speack (sic) english (sic)."

--Subject High School Senior

III. DATA ANALYSIS

SURVEY DATA

In analyzing the data I collected from the written surveys, I developed three potential responses to each question, then assigned a point value (1, 2, or 3) to each of these responses. I then tallied the points for each survey and created a scale to rate the overall feeling generated by it. This scale, as did the responses for each question, ranged from positive or somewhat positive, to those which could best be deemed neutral (a semantic term, as no response or survey was truly neutral), to somewhat negative or negative responses. The actual percentages for each question can be found in Appendix B. I will discuss each question in detail, giving the reason for my asking it and the range of answers that I received.

I first set out (Question 1) to establish what level of contact each student had with the Indochinese. My intent was to discover how many students actually came into close contact with the Indochinese as opposed to those who were merely aware of their physical presence. The largest number of students (53%) were those who had what I called "medium contact." This meant that the student had a class with Indochinese students, saw them regularly on campus, or may occasionally have talked with one, but nothing more extensive. Typical responses in this category included, "There are several in my P.E. class, and they are on teams with me. Other than that, I have had no contact with them." and "I see them around campus and in some of my classes." Further down the scale were 21% of the students with low levels of contact, whose responses were typically, "No contact. None at all." Those who had peer tutored,

participated in Human Relations Day or had several classes with them (26%), were designated as having high contact. These students said things such as, "I'm a peer tutor for a reading class for these students. I see them once a day." and "I interviewed an Indochinese student for my English class. I talk to him and see him on a regular basis." As I will indicate later in my paper, the level of contact a student had with the Indochinese profoundly affected his attitude toward them.

My second question was intended to probe the surface relationship established above for something deeper. A majority of students (54%) indicated an interest in developing a friendship with an Indochinese student, yet only 28% had actually done something about this interest. The correlation between those who had high levels of contact with the Indochinese and those who had acted upon their interest was almost 100%. A large number of students (47%) indicated no interest or indifference to the prospect of an Indochinese friend. Their responses ranged from a fairly neutral "No strong desire not to, but no interest either" to a blatantly hostile "No. Because I think they should stay in there (sic) own country because most are on welfare and don't consider getting a job also most cannot even speack (sic) english (sic)." While it is true that a majority of the students demonstrated an interest in developing a friendship, fully 73% of the students had not tried to establish one either in classes or in extra-curricular activities.

Question 3 again attempted to go beyond the level of contact each student claimed to have with the Indochinese. The responses were very similar to the above question: 19% indicated an interest and had done something about it; 36% had an interest in learning about the culture but had done nothing; 45% demonstrated indifference or no interest

whatsoever. Again the responses ranged from extremely positive---"I definitely would like to learn all about the cross-cultural differences between the Indochinese culture and ours"---to the somewhat neutral---"It would be interesting, but not something I would seek out"---to the decidedly negative---"...I have enough trouble understanding American culture."

In asking Question 4, I was attempting to understand how the American students felt about the Indochinese students as a group. In retrospect, I see that this was a poorly worded question which incorporated my previously mentioned biases: I assumed that students would generalize and make negative statements about all Indochinese students. Even the most negative students, however, did not make blanket statements, but responded more typically with, "Some are nice but others cause trouble and don't seem to care about adjusting to America. They can be rude to us and act very spoiled. However, there are some who really do try." Most students refused to generalize and one student derided my even asking the question: "...saying that I like them or dislike them seems to refer to them as pets." The students most likely to make general statements were those who had positive feelings about them: "Any Indochinese student I have had contact with has left me with positive feelings" and "I like them. They seem very eager to learn and work hard to belong." The responses to this question caused me to think about my own feelings toward the Indochinese and in so doing, I realized that it is impossible to make any sort of broad generalization, either positive or negative. I find it a little heartening to discover that not a single student, no matter how negative his other responses, was willing to do so.

The written responses I received to Question 5 were the only ones which differed sharply from those I received in the interviews. The

question asked whether students were bothered by the Indochinese speaking among themselves in their own languages. When I spoke with the students, they almost inevitably mentioned that this and the clannishness of the Indochinese was most disturbing to them. I expected a similar reaction to the question in the survey, but got quite the opposite reaction. Only 17% of the students said they were bothered by this ("I dislike their speaking among themselves very much. It's alright (sic) if they also know English, but when they talk at you in their language, it ticks me off."), while 32% admitted to being somewhat bothered. Yet a full 51% said this did not bother them at all and expressed understanding and compassion for their wanting to do so. One student said, "...if they can find comfort talking amongst themselves, then that's fine...", while another explained, "I think that I too would tend to protect myself by hanging around people who spoke my language." I am unable to explain this discrepancy, especially since the students I interviewed were so adamant about this point, often commenting on it even before I specifically asked them.

The responses to Question 6 were the most clear cut of all. Only three students (7%) thought that the Indochinese students fit in well or were accepted well by other American students. Some students (23%) expressed the thought that although they did not fit in well at present, they were beginning the process of assimilation. An overwhelming majority (70%) felt that the Indochinese neither fit in nor were accepted by the American students. Within this group of students, however, there was a broad range of responses, from those who seemed to feel there was no hope for assimilation ("The Indochinese students will probably never feel comfortable with American students at this or any other high school. And vice versa") to those who viewed the future positively ("I'm not so sure

they fit in perfectly with the American students right now. But in the future, they will fit in").

In Question 7, students were asked directly to describe an Indochinese student. The range and type of responses I received to this question was significant. I divided the responses into three groups: positive, neutral, and negative. The percentages here are quite similar to those in the first series of questions---27% provided positive descriptions, 56% neutral, and 17% negative. As a point of clarification, I should say that I classified responses as neutral which had to do with descriptions of physical appearance (short, dark haired, thin) or demeanor (shy, apprehensive). Again, this is a somewhat semantic distinction because it is impossible for me to know whether those descriptions were actually neutral. But there was a clear distinction between those which I classed as either positive or negative and those which were neutral. Importantly, I should add that those responses which fell into the negative category were almost exclusively concerning physical and material qualities ("bad taste in clothes" occurred most frequently) while those ranked as positive had to do with personal attributes ("Brave! It takes a lot of guts to come into a foreign school and perform well." "They are very eager to learn and do everything correctly. They want to be friends and have friends."). Furthermore, I find the 17% negative figure supportive of my feelings (detailed in the methodology section) concerning accuracy. While in my final analysis 52% of the surveys ranked as negative and 26% of those strongly negative, when given the opportunity to say something directly derogatory, the majority of respondents chose not to. Instead, their negative comments were masked in other responses or appeared in responses to questions which allowed them to vent negative or hostile feelings in more indirect ways.

I will discuss the final rankings and percentages as well as

cross-correlation of data in the final section of my paper.

INTERVIEW DATA

With the exception of Question 5, the information I received in the personal interviews corresponded quite accurately with that of the survey. I attempted in the interview to ask the same questions that the written survey asked, and for the most part I was able to do so. Several conversations, though, led into other areas, and it is these that I will discuss here.

As I mentioned earlier, the students I spoke with almost invariably mentioned two things: the clannishness of the Indochinese and their use of their native languages. Moreover, there was a feeling expressed in the interviews not really found in the surveys, of crowdedness, of huge influxes of the Indochinese. One girl seemed to be of the impression that the entire population of Indochina had settled in Stockton. "It's just so crowded," she told me. "You know, it's like they're all here, all at once..." and in the course of the interview it became apparent that it was the crowded conditions that "make you have hostility toward them." Another girl was of the same mind on this issue: "It's cause there's so many and they just came all at one...it's like you see them and they're always in the way or something...if you drive through some neighborhoods, you just see them all over. You know, last year or two years ago it wasn't like this. There's so many of them." These thoughts were echoed by a large number of the students I interviewed personally.

Two other, somewhat interrelated ideas that surface in the interview did not figure predominantly in the surveys. The first was a strangely protective, "we-were-here-first" kind of patriotism. When asked who should make the effort to ease assimilation, the Americans, the

Indochinese, or both, one girl responded, "I think the Indochinese should be the ones to make more of an effort. Well, cause they came here, if they're gonna be here they should try to fit in." Another student, asked how he felt about the Indochinese speaking their own languages said, "Well, in a way...it's kind of un-American, you know, as long as they're here they might as well give it a shot." In a similar vein, several students attacked the Indochinese as an American burden due to their drawing of welfare monies. The views of quite a few students placed the Indochinese into an unenviable double-bind position: they are portrayed as lazy on the one hand, and as a threat to job opportunities on the other.

"Even the people who hate them realize
there are no simple solutions..."

--Vince Brown, Catholic Charities

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Simply analyzed, the data I collected through my surveys and interviews support my pre-study views that tension and hostility exists between American and Indochinese students. Negative views about the Indochinese were expressed by a majority (52%) of the students; 26% were strongly negative. At the other end of the scale, only 13% of the students expressed strongly positive views, while 15% were somewhat positive.

My purpose in doing this study, though, was not soley to determine such a conclusion, but to "probe the relationships" which exist between these two groups of students the subject high school. A deeper analysis of my statistics, then, has led me to make two more complex and, I think, more important, conclusions.

The first concerns the existing language barrier. Both the most positive and the most negative students expressed the view that an easing of this language barrier is necessary to ease existing tensions. Several of the students who expressed negative views about the Indochinese also mentioned that they did have friends who were Indochinese, but they qualified this by saying that the friend had been in the United States for four or five years and could speak English fluently. One sophomore claimed that he wouldn't even speak to an Indochinese student "unless he spoke fluent English." Many of the more positive students saw the situation growing increasingly better as the language difficulties shrunk.

It is too easy, though, to draw such a conclusion and then to wave the problem away, assigning it to those who are assigned to teach basic English. Students who walk from English-speaking classrooms to

groups of Cambodian-, Laotian-, and Vietnamese-speaking friends do not become readily assimilated. Students stop speaking their native languages and start speaking English when they have someone with whom they can speak English. The responsibility belongs not only to those teachers, but to anyone who has expressed a desire to see that language barrier shrink.

My second conclusion surfaces after a cross-correlation is made of the data. If Questions 1,2,3, and 7 are compared, it becomes immediately apparent that a correlation exists between high contact and positive feelings and medium to low contact and negative feelings. That 26% of the students that I established as having high contact with the Indochinese were the same students who responded positively to Question 7. Exposure to the Indochinese does not cause students to dislike them, lack of exposure does. It is non-exposure or low levels of contact that perpetuate ill feelings and racial tensions.

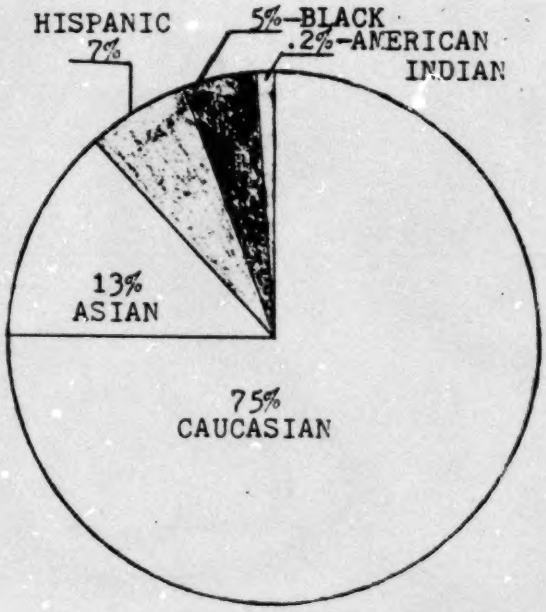
But here a problem arises. A correlation exists between high contact, high interest, and positive responses. But a huge number of students indicated indifference to or no interest in extending their relationships any further. The task, I think, is to separate those whose 'indifference' stems from hostility (i.e., they claim to be indifferent because in their hostility they have managed to shut out the Indochinese) from those whose 'indifference' is linked to a lack of motivation or a lack of opportunity for exposure and then to offer that second group some sort of exposure. In so doing, the number of students with high levels of contact with the Indochinese will increase, and assuming the data are accurate, the number of students who express positive opinions about the Indochinese should increase as well.

My findings are surely not new; with each group of immigrants to enter this country, Americans have found a new scapegoat. But they are relevant, I think, because they speak to an issue which we now more fully understand. And they are relevant, I think, because in providing us with the understanding of that issue, they also provide us with the knowledge and the ability to change it.

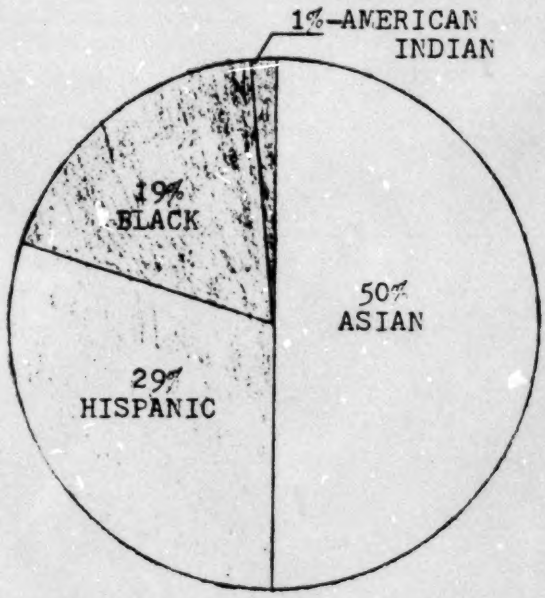
APPENDIX A

SUBJECT SCHOOL DISTRICT STATISTICS

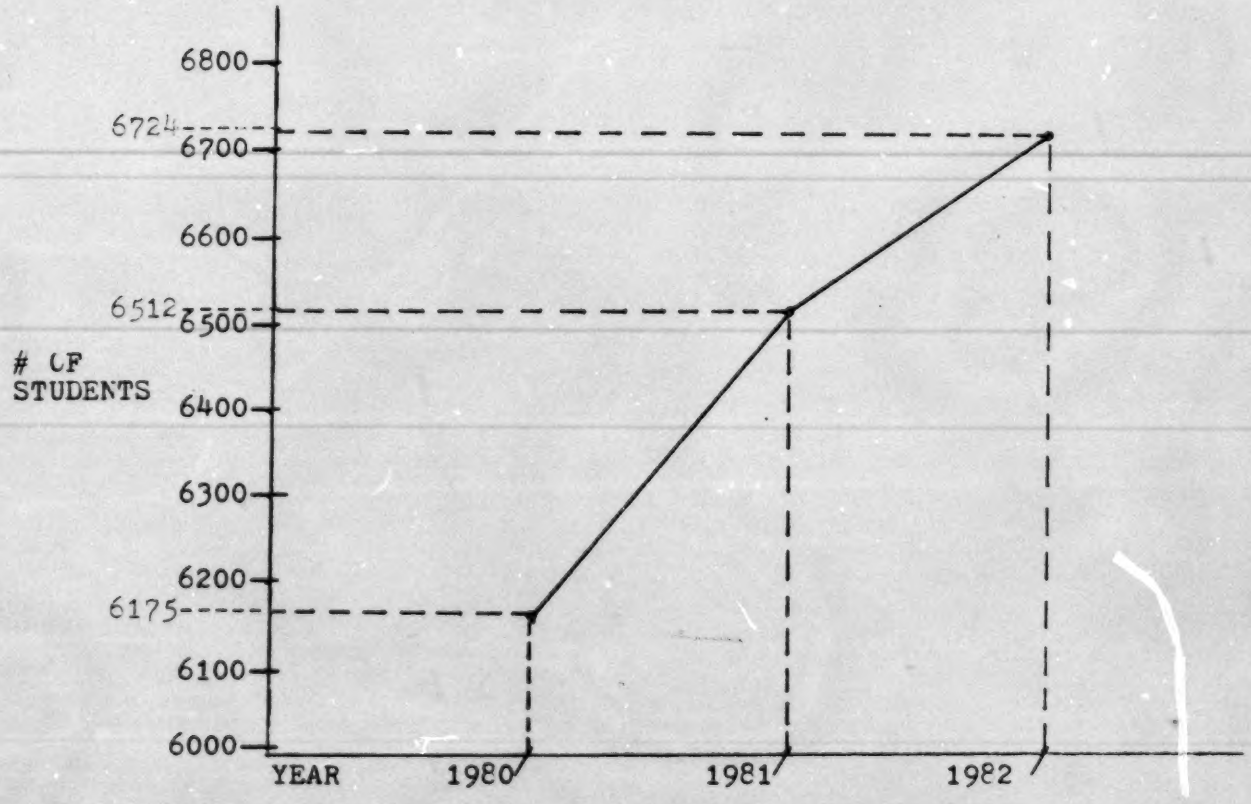
ETHNIC BREAKDOWN



MINORITY POPUTATION



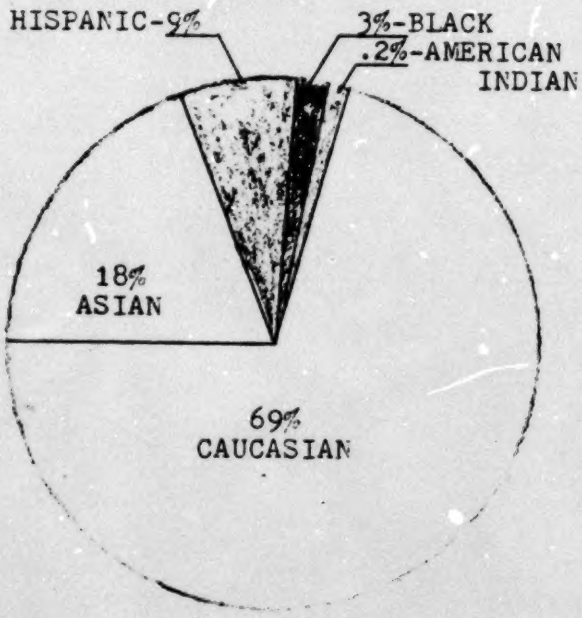
POPULATION GROWTH



APPENDIX A

SUBJECT HIGH SCHOOL STATISTICS

ETHNIC BREAKDOWN



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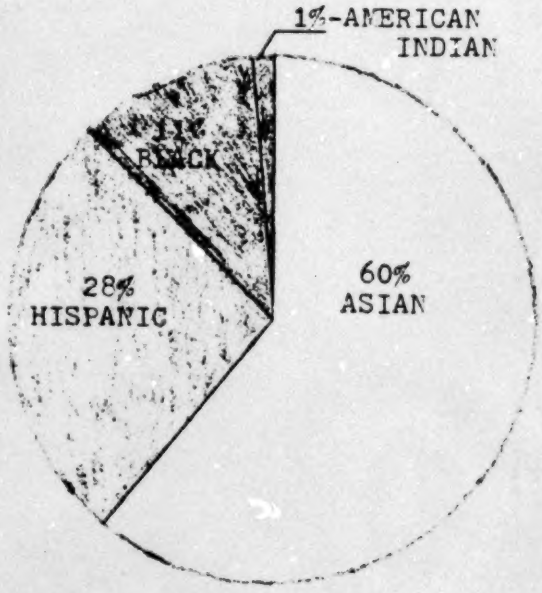
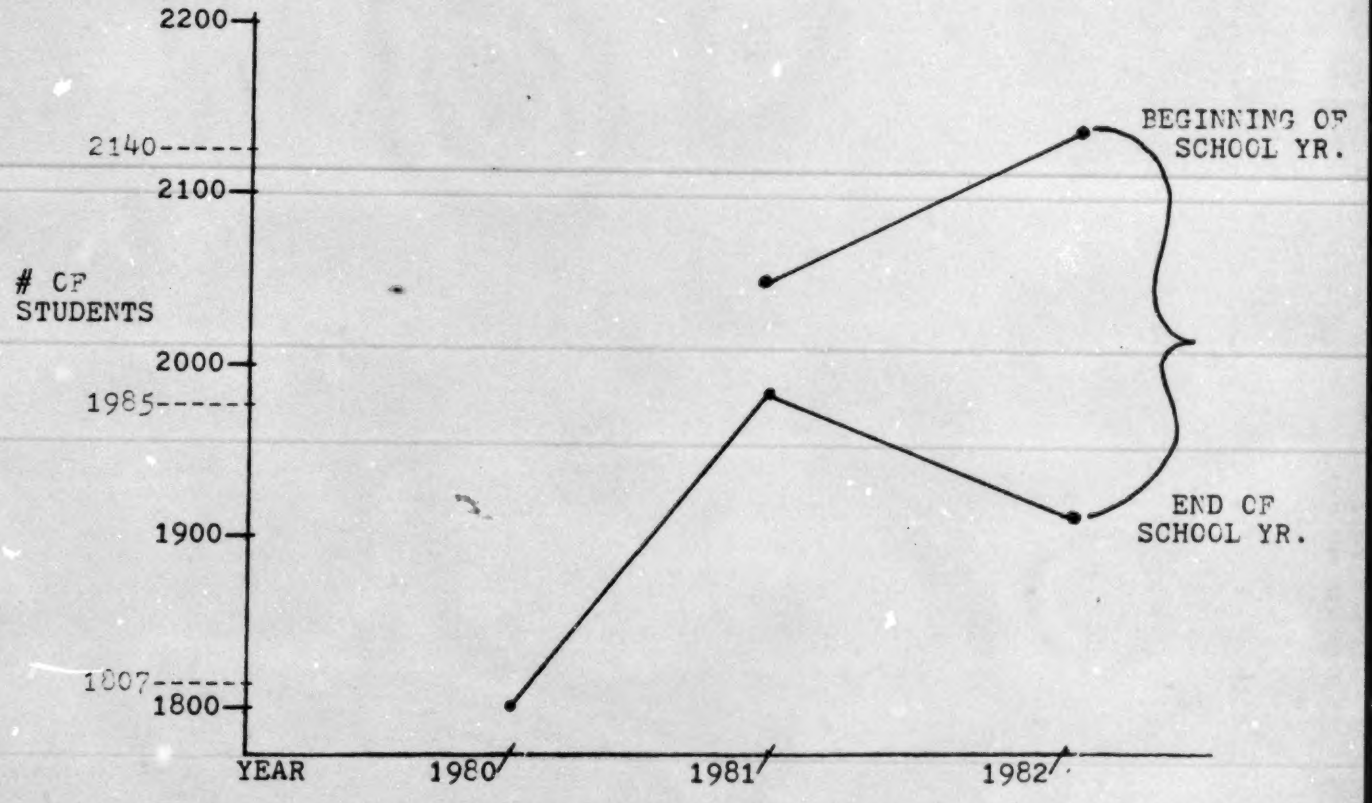


POPULATION GROWTH



APPENDIX B

SURVEY DATA

QUESTION 1:

Have you had any contact with any Indo-Chinese students? What kind of contact? (Do you talk to them or see them on a regular basis? every once in a while? not at all?)

High contact	Medium contact	Low contact
26%	53%	21%

QUESTION 2:

Do you have any interest in developing a friendship with an Indo-Chinese student? Have you personally tried to establish a friendship with any Indo-Chinese students in your classes? in any extra curricular activities?

Interest yes Done something	Interest yes Done nothing	Interest no Indifference
28%	26%	47%

QUESTION 3:

Do you have any interest in learning something about the Indo-Chinese culture? What have you done about this interest? Could you describe some basic differences between American culture and Indo-Chinese culture?

Interest high Done something	Interest yes Done nothing	Interest no Indifference
19%	36%	45%

QUESTION 4:

How do you feel about the Indo-Chinese students? Do you like them? Do you dislike them? Do you feel indifferent toward them? Why?

I was unable to draw any generalized categories from this question.

QUESTION 5:

Does it bother you that they speak among themselves in a foreign language? Do you find them approachable as a group? How about as individuals?

Not bothered	Somewhat bothered	Bothered
51%	32%	17%

APPENDIX B

Survey Data, continued

QUESTION 6:

How do you think the Indo-Chinese fit in with American students at Lincoln? How do you think the Indo-Chinese are accepted by other Lincoln students?

Fit in well Accepted well	Fit in somewhat Accepted somewhat	Fit in poorly Accepted poorly
7%	23%	70%

QUESTION 7:

If you were asked to describe an Indo-Chinese student, what would be the first thing to come to your mind?

Positive description	Neutral description	Negative description
27%	56%	17%

SUMMARIZATION OF DATA:

Positive survey	Neutral survey	Negative survey
28%	20%	52%

Strongly Positive	Somewhat Positive	Neutral	Somewhat Negative	Strongly Negative
13%	15%	20%	26%	26%